

ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

— 50TH ANNIVERSARY —

MV Columbia on 9/11/2001

Like a lot of people, the military brought us to Alaska in 1995. My wife was active-duty Air Force and she had been assigned to Elmendorf AFB in Anchorage. We were lucky enough to have been allowed to serve two consecutive tours at Elmendorf and we were in the last year of that second tour when my wife was selected for Officer Training School.

Being selected for OTS caused us to leave Alaska about 8 months sooner than we normally would have. Since we had driven the Alcan all the way from Texas when we moved to Alaska, we elected to take the ferry when we moved back to the lower-48. We arrived in Haines and boarded the M/V Columbia on the evening of September 10th, 2001.

I have to admit that I don't recall the exact order of all of our stops on the way south to Bellingham but I do remember that our first stop was Juneau very early on the morning of 9/11. Since we were traveling with our two dogs, we disembarked at each of these stops to walk our dogs and we did that when we arrived in Juneau. One thing I do remember about the stop in Juneau was hearing a jet takeoff from the Juneau airport. It would be interesting to see a timetable for that trip as I believe we were in Juneau just before the attacks took place. That airplane must have been in flight when the attacks occurred and I often wonder where it eventually landed.

As I recall, our next stop after Juneau was Sitka and we were underway for at least 10-12 hours before we arrived there. Early in the afternoon of 9/11, I can recall being outside on one of the decks trying to photograph some whales we could see in the distance. Another passenger had struck up a conversation with me while I was outside. It was mostly just idle chit-chat but I will never forget the



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last thing he said to me. He told me that he had "heard" that someone had crashed an airplane into a skyscraper in New York City. Being a pilot myself, I really thought he at the very least had his facts wrong or was just flat-out nuts. I recalled a story about a bomber flying into the side of the Empire State Building during WW II but I just couldn't imagine a scenario where that could happen in modern times.

I excused myself and started walking back to our cabin. I hadn't walked too far when the Captain made an announcement over the ship's PA system telling everyone of the attacks. I recall the announcement being brief but to the point of what had happened. When I got back to our cabin I can recall looking at my wife and we were just both speechless. We just couldn't make sense of what we'd just heard. So the first real news we received telling us of the attacks was that PA announcement and that occurred a good 10 hours or so after the attacks had actually taken place.

The first thing I did was dig out an AM/FM/SW radio I had brought along and tried to tune in a radio station to get some news. I seem to recall being close enough to Sitka at that point to pick-up their local public radio station. That would be the drill for the rest of the trip. As we worked our way south, we traveled in and out of range of all of these public radio stations that every little town in Southeast seems to have and that was the only real source of information we had. It wasn't until we pulled into Ketchikan late in the day on Wednesday 9/12/01 that we saw the first pictures of the attack. The crew tuned the big-screen TV located in the lounge to one of the local Ketchikan TV stations and I can recall watching the first video any of us had seen of the attacks on that TV.

All of the above served to remind us just how remote our journey was. It also made me feel, oddly perhaps, "safe".



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As I said before, I don't recall the exact order of the towns we pulled into but I do remember stopping in Petersburg and Wrangell before we pulled into Ketchikan. We noticed that we were picking up a lot of walk-on passengers when we stopped in these towns and it dawned on us that we were probably one of the few modes of public transportation still moving in those first few days after the attacks and before the airlines started flying again. I'm certain a lot of these people had been stranded because Alaska Airlines (along with everyone else) had been grounded. There were a lot of people sleeping in chairs in the lounge and observation decks.

With my wife's retirement from the service, we have since moved back to Alaska and we now live in Eagle River.

Written by Clinton Bersuch

